New York Theatre Critics' Reviews *1955*

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 25, 1955

Cat Yowls High On 'Hot Tin Roof'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Tennessee Williams offers at the Morosco Theater a turbulent opera about avarice and mendacity in the modern South in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

The play functions like a snake charmer. It holds one's hypnotized and breathless attention, while it writhes and yowls and bares the souls of its participants with a shameless tongue.

The major figure is that of a dying millionaire planter, self-made and with a Titanic patience. The cancer that is destroying him stimulates his two daughters-in-law to clawful efforts to cut in on his fortune.

Faithful Unto Papa's Death.

One of the girls has made her bid for popularity through indomitable fertility. She has produced a brood of what must stand as the South's most horrifying children, and promises more.

The lady of the title is in more serious personal trouble. Ambitious and poor, she has caught the magnetic younger son, an ex-athlete who has forsaken TV sports announcing for the bottle.

As the play progresses it develops that the Cat is denied conjugal attentions because she has, through jealousy, caused the collapse and death of her husband's devoted lifelong friend. Only in the end is the truth of the two men's puzzling relationship clarified.

Lies of Modern Life.

What the author chiefly says is that even the best intentions do not avoid the inherent mendaciousness of modern living. All these people are lying to themselves and each other. It takes a white hot climax of emotion to drag the actual truth into the open.

This stylization is immensely effective. Elia Kazan gives it flourish, innovation and freedom.

Barbara Bel Geddes is magnificent as the ambitious frustrated young wife. She rarely stops talking in the first act, but captures the volatile intonation of Southern speech like a native.

Burl Ives as Father.

Co-starred with her is Burl Ives as the dying father. He cuts a magnificent figure, like a rock mountain, as he relates his earthy jokes and whips his family into line.

The most astonishing performance of the evening is that of Mildred Dunnock as the mother. She manages to be tasteless, rowdy and feather-brained in a horrifying manner, which is yet always genuine.

Ben Gazzara plays the disturbed and alcoholic husband, in a rare physical performance. With one foot in a cast throughout, he must hop and fall and drag himself about painfully, and does so with great grace.

"CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF"

Play by Tennessee Williams; staged by Elia Kazan; setting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the Morosco Theatre, March 24, 1955. The cast:

Lacey.....Maxwell Glanville
Sookey.....Musa Williams
Margaret...Barbara Bel Geddes
Brick.....Ben Gazzara
Mae.....Madeleine Sherwood
Gooper.....Pat Hingle
Big Mama.....Mildred Dunnock
Dixie.....Pauline Hahn
Buster.....Darryl Richard
Sonny.....Seth Edwards
Trixie.....Janice Dunn
Big Daddy.....Burl Ives
Rev. Tooker.....Fred Stewart
Doctor Baugh..R. G. Armstrong
Daisy.....Eva Vaughan Smith
Brightie.....Brownie McGhee
Small.....Sonny Terry

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 25, 1955

THEATER

'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'

By WALTER F. KERR

"CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF" is a beautifully written, perfectly directed, stunningly acted play of evasion: evasion on the part of its principal character, evasion perhaps on the part of its playwright.

In a dimly-lit, significantly shuttered bed-sitting room on a Mississippi plantation, a young and handsome athlete hobbles about on crutches, heads for his private bar with purposeful regularity, and refuses to sleep with his wife.

He has had, in his life, one profound friendship: with a fellow football player. The friend is now dead—dead of drink—and this bitter and sodden Tennessee Williams hero is sure of just one thing. The descent of his friend, and his own as well, began with a half-uttered suspicion on the part of his wife—a suspicion that the close relation of the two men was unnatural. The wife has felt left out; she has pried her way in, in an innocent but ugly and disastrous fashion; her husband cannot now bear the sight of her.

As Barbara Bel Geddes prattles despairingly on about the other men who do desire her; as the young man's parents nag and scratch at him in greedy hope of an heir; as the pressures of sex, alcohol, and family pride mount, the play at the Morosco stretches this tormented soul taut on the rack and then claws at his open "sores."

Brilliant scenes, scenes of sudden and lashing dramatic power, break open. A horde of birthday-partying children pours into the bedroom just as Ben Gazzara, as the anguished Brick, is attempting to silence his wife forever with the head of his crutch. Barbara Bel Geddes, knowing what she has done to this man but fiercely begging credit for telling the truth, pounds out a first-act scene of devastating honesty. Throughout the play images of searing intensity hold you fast to its elusive narrative: a father sending his helpless son crashing to the floor; a mother hanging on a doctor's lapels and begging for a lie; a terrifying family gathering in which those who should offer love behave like vultures. There is, indeed, no one moment in the evening when the stinging accuracy of Mr. Williams' ear for human speech, or director Elia Kazan's passion for brutal but truthful statement, is not compellingly in evidence.

There is, however, a tantalizing reluctance—beneath all the fire and all the apparent candor—to let the play blurt out its promised secret. This isn't due to the nerve-wracking, extraordinarily prolonged silence of its central fugure, to his merely repeating the questions of other people rather than answering them. It is due to the fact that when we do come to a fiery scene of open confession—between a belligerent father and his defiant son—the truth still dodges around verbal corners, slips somewhere between the veranda shutters, refuses to meet us on firm, clear terms.

We do learn, in a faint echo of "The Children's Hour," that there has been something to the accusation—at least on the part of Brick's friend. We learn that Brick himself, in his horror at the discovery, has done the damage he blames on his wife. But we never quite penetrate Brick's own facade, know or share his precise feelings. And when he does turn once more to his wife, taking her hand across the marriage bed, it is not really out of a new relationship with her: it is out of vague admiration for a sturdy lie she has told, and out of merciful affection for his father. In "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" you will believe every word that is unspoken; you may still long for some that seem not to be spoken.

This is, I think, a flaw in the work. It should not keep you from seeing it. Mr. Williams is the man of our time who comes closest to hurling the actual blood and bone of life onto the stage; he is also the man whose prose comes closest to being an incisive natural poetry. If the new play has not the staggering clarity of "A Streetcar Named Desire," it is a probing and disturbing stroke from the same pen.

And the production has no flaw. Apart from Barbara Bel Geddes' lashing and altogether luminous performance as the tenacious wife, and Ben Gazzara's steely cold portrait of a man torn by divided loyalties and anguished self-doubt, there is a Rabelasian contribution from Burl Ives that is apt to be the talk of the town. Mr. Ives is seen as the massive master of the Delta estate, an oracle who exhales profanities with every puff of his cigar and a father who is not above cutting his son's heart open. The performance is not only robust in scale; it is filled with many a courageous nuance. Mildred Dunnock is startlingly fine in an unfamiliar sort of the role: the brash, gravel-voiced, outspoken matron of the house. In supporting roles Madeleine Sherwood and Pat Hingle are particularly effective.

Daily Mirror

March 25, 1955

'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' Is Likely to Be a Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which the Playwrights' Company brought to the Morosco Theatre Thursday evening, Tennessee Williams has penned a bitter play about mean people. The language is the strongest heard hereabouts in quite a spell. Williams doesn't call a spade a spade, but rather a steam shovel.

WE CAME AWAY with the impression that Tennessee is disturbed about death and the shoddiness of women. The cat in question is a restless, ambitious girl married to a sensitive husband who wants no part of her. For she had accused him of an unnatural relationship with a college mate and fellow football player.

The action takes place in the bedroom of a manor house on the biggest plantation in the Mississippi Delta. The boy's father, and the lord of the manor, is a "turkey neck" who has worked himself up from nothing to millions and wonders if it was all worth it. He too, hasn't much use for his addlepated spouse.

In the end, with the head of the family dying of cancer, the boy and the insatiable cat determine to have an heir. Because his loathing for a shifty brother and sister-in-law is worse than that for his own unscrupulous wife. It's a cynical finish to a hard-boiled drama.

MUCH OF THE language is right from the barnyard and such as would never be heard in a decent aristocratic home. But these people are anything but aristocrats, and much less than decent. They are neurotic, frustrated, and fascinated by bawdy speech.

Even though the Williams characters are repulsive to those accustomed to the niceties, the amenities, of life, they generate a lot of emotional tension and excitement. Under Elia Kazan's direction, they perform their pieces with the virtuosity of opera singers blending arias with choruses.

Barbara Bel Geddes has almost a monologue in the first act, as the cat, and brings it off triumphantly. Burl Ives contributes an unforgettable characterization as the doomed land owner who wonders if money and power have compensated for a rather empty existence. Ben Gazzara, who was outstanding as the bully in "End as a Man," plays the disillusioned son and husband with restraint and admirable effect.

MILDRED DUNNOCK is excellent as a shrill, well-meaning mother. Madeleine Sherwood and Pat Hingle are devastatingly realistic as two schemers, "sometimes called Sister Woman and Brother Man." The heads of the brood are known as Big Papa and Big Mama. Ugh!

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is not a play we would want to see again. Once is enough. But we think it will prove a sensational hit. Hopeful customers were already in line at the box-office before the rise of the curtain on the first Manhattan performance. We trust their stomachs are stronger than ours.

After all, Williams is a craftsman, and has a big following. In this instance, as in "Camino Real," he is absorbed with disturbed and disturbing people, tired of living and scared of dying. People of little integrity, willing to make enormous compromises for the easiest way out.

DAILY NEWS

March 25, 1955

'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' Beautifully Acted, but a Frustrating Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which was given a beautiful production and performance last evening at the Morosco Theatre, is another of his perceptive and sympathetic dramas of frustration—but I think this time he has outfrustrated himself by failing to remain in command of his own play. After he's got it he doesn't know what to do with it. As a piece of theatre it has vivid characters and an occasional exciting scene and I sat intent through it all; but when it was over I felt frustrated myself—felt that some heart or point or purpose was missing. I felt also that the considerable amount of dirty talk in it was mere boyish bravado and rather pointless.

The plot is something like a modern, or psychiatric, version of a much stronger drama, "The Little Foxes," by Lillian Hellman. In the Williams play nobody, except maybe Burl Ives, approaches being likeable, although everybody is to be sympathized with. Ives has ten million dollars, a 28,000-acre plantation down South somewhere, a wife he has been contemptuous of for many years, a forthright tongue—and cancer.

Nobody's Happy

This man also has two sons. One is stuffy and upright and the other is a drunkard and queer. Both are married, and the stuffy one has a noisy wife and many noisy children. The queer one, who started drinking when his football teammate died, also has a wife but no children, so the wife is frustrateder than anybody, particularly with all this money and land in the offing.

The childless son also has a broken ankle which he got from trying to jump some hurdles at 3 A. M. while drunk. I don't know why author Williams gave him this broken ankle, specially, but he's got it and has to totter around on a crutch all the time. This gets dull after three long acts.

Under the heavily stylized direction of Elia Kazan, and within a simple but beautiful set by Jo Mielziner, there are some absolutely splendid performances. Barbara Bel Geddes, as the cripple's wife, carries almost all of the first act in a monologue, and no actress was ever more resourceful as she bemoans the fact that she is totally childless and totally useless. It is a luminous and appealing job.

Ben Gazzara, as her liquor-guzzling husband, speaks quietly most of the time, but with force and fidelity, and his, too, is an admirable impersonation. Ives, who is physically immense, also is dramatically immense as the cancer-doomed padrone of a great estate—forthright and profane; and Mildred Dunnock gives a fragile and touching performance as his wife.

There is a great deal of fine theatre in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," but I wish there were more point and direction in the play.

New York Post

March 25, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Impact of Tennessee Williams

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is a play of tremendous dramatic impact. There are many other things to be said of Tennessee Williams' tormented and tormenting new drama, with its emotional intensity, its almost sadistic probing into lost souls, its neurotic brooding, its insight into decadence, and its torrent of language both lyric and lewd. But the main impression that emerges from a first viewing of Elia Kazan's entirely brilliant production, which had a tense opening performance at the Morosco Theater last night, is of that enormous theatrical power.

This quality in the play is indicated most impressively in a long scene that occupies the larger part of the middle act. It is an episode in which the dominating and vulgar-mouthed owner of a vast Mississippi plantation, buoyed up by the mistaken belief that he isn't dying of cancer, sets out to find why his favorite son has become a drunkard and ends by discovering the secret of his boy's fear and the truth of his own doom. Superbly played by Burl Ives and Ben Gazzara, the entire scene is not far from overwhelming in its unrelieved tension.

Two Paradoxes

There are, I think, several curious and somewhat paradoxical matters in connection with the drama. For one, despite the ceaseless emotional power and the understanding of the tortured weaknesses of mankind, it is not, I believe, a play that moves one with compassion. It is dramatically shattering, but it is not equally shattering to the heart. For another thing, it has an ending in which I had great difficulty in believing, in which an apparent reconciliation takes place between the son, who has a deep terror that he is homosexual, and his neglected and insulted wife. It seems almost a happy conclusion, yet the final impression is one of doom.

As in so much of his work for the theater, Mr. Williams is once more concerned with a lost lady and the destruction of her dreams and the wreck of her prized gentility. The heroine of the new play has been rejected by her husband in the bitterness of his fears. This time, however, her spirit has not been ruined, and she fights back gallantly. But don't think the playwright has become a dewy optimist. He is still filled with terrible visions of human defeat.

Final Paradox

Although "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is a grimly realistic play